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(КУЛТУРА, СЛАВЈАНСТВО И ЕКОНОМИЈА)

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МЕЃУНАРОДЕН ДИЈАЛОГ
ИСТОК - ЗАПАД

(КУЛТУРА, СЛАВЈАНСТВО И ЕКОНОМИЈА)

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN WESTERN BALKANS
- A PREREQUISITE FOR EUROPEAN UNION INTEGRATION

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Abstract

This article analyzes the necessity of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, common political, economic and social problems in the region as a prerequisite for European Union integration. The efforts of the EU to foster and enhance the regional cooperation among Western Balkan countries should be viewed as an incentive to addressing cross-boundary issues, and not as a threat that individual accession could be obstructed. Having in mind the complexity of the issue related to the Balkans integration, this paper attempts to identify what the implications for enlargement are, and the influence of the existing factors that might have an impact on stability in the region.

Despite of the individual approach towards states in the Western Balkan region and the EU's advocacy, the relations between European Union and Western Balkans will probably remain characterized by a more regional approach, in terms of commonly used models of accession and applying the same criteria and assessing achievements.

The EU major initiatives show that this restructuring will not end with full membership, but will remain an open-ended process. Therefore we should conclude that the European Union's strategy towards the Western Balkans accession is a hegemonic project.

Key words: Regional integration, Western Balkans, Enlargement, EU Accession

Introduction

Integration of the states into alliances, regional and international organization should enhance the stability and security in the specific regions and in the world. The European Union (EU) is an example for economic and political cooperation among the states in the Europe. Seven waves of the EU enlargement move the boundaries of the EU to the South and Eastern Europe. The integration and unification of the states in the EU will not be completed if the Western Balkan (WB) region remains outside the borders of the EU¹. Dissolution of the Yugoslavia with wars affected with interethnic conflicts within the states and among the states of the Western Balkan regions. Re-establishments of the mutual international cooperation among the states in the region were highly supported by the international community and especially with the assistance of the EU. The region remains very fragile and sensitive concerning specific questions mainly related to the ethnic communities.

The last enlargement of the EU, where Croatia became the full member state on 1st July 2013, shown that the integration of the WB states is necessity and reality and one of the highest priorities of the EU. Furthermore, it is very likely that the candidate status granted to the Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro would bring stability not only to the country itself but also to the broader region. In addition, reconstruction, democratization and institutional building are mostly financed by the financial instrument of EU².

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the Western Balkans refers to the region comprising the remained six Southeastern European countries involved in the EU Stabilisation and Association Process: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia.

² The EU countries provide the largest part of the financial assistance for development and reconstruction projects. See http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/instruments/overview/index_en.htm

Common Accession Criteria applied towards Different WB States

The EU enlargement in May 2004, with ten Eastern European countries, including Slovenia, stimulates the remaining countries to speed the way towards EU enlargement. However, the Western Balkan countries, due to internal democratic, political and economic problems did not start their approach towards the EU simultaneously. Croatia officially since 1 July 2013 has become a member states of the Union. While Macedonia have already submitted applications for EU membership, some countries in the region that still face security problems are far from making the application. Furthermore, nationalistic policies, one of the main concerns of the international community that slows down the integration of the Western Balkans, are not being removed equally quickly in all of the region's countries³.

In the following paragraphs, the individual approach of the EU towards each of the Western Balkan countries will be examined, and consideration given to whether the security situation has actual implications on enlargement.

The State of Art of the Process of EU Integration of Western Balkans States

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The weak states of the Western Balkans have been stabilized through a number of internationally brokered peace agreements. In the same way, the current (quasi) stability is maintained by the presence of international peacekeeping forces. The Dayton Peace Accords of November 1995 ended ethnic conflicts in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But the provisions of the peace agreement have kept Bosnia and Herzegovina in a position of a quasi-protectorate, governed by both domestic institutions and the international community. The idea that has been present in public debates in BiH for some years now advocates that decisions on Bosnia and Herzegovina distribution of power and resources should not be made

³ The Republic of Croatia was the first of the Western Balkans countries to submit an application for EU membership on 21 February 2003 and received EU candidate status in June 2004. Macedonia officially handed in the application for EU membership on February 2004.

by the international community, but by the country's political elite. Some suggest that in order to undertake necessary reforms, Bosnia and Herzegovina should become a federal state comprising twelve federal units⁴.

Republic of Macedonia

Even though it was the first country of the region to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2000, Republic of Macedonia submitted its membership application on March 22, 2004. The [European Council](#) officially granted the country candidate status on 17 December 2005, after a review and a positive recommendation of the candidacy by the European Commission.

A major obstacle for the accession process is the Republic's still-unresolved dispute with Greece over its name. While the country prefers to be called by its constitutional name, Republic of Macedonia, the European Union, in acknowledgment of concerns raised by Greece, has maintained a practice of recognizing it only as the "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", the compromise "provisional reference" introduced by the United Nations in 1993. Greece, as any other EU country, has veto power against new accessions, and has repeatedly stated that it will block Macedonian accession unless the naming issue is resolved beforehand. Since 2008, resolution of the naming conflict has also been added to the official preconditions raised by the EU. The expected accession is currently described as a "medium to long term" prospect

Also, the Ohrid peace agreement, signed on 13 August 2001, ended seven months of fighting between the ethnic Albanian rebels of the National Liberation Army (UCK) and Macedonian government forces in Macedonia. The prompt intervention of the international community in this case made unlikely "a repetition of the scenario of Bosnia and Herzegovina". Consequently, the government decided on 16 December 2003 to undertake a concrete action plan for the implementation of the Agreement.

⁴ The report prepared by the European Stability Initiative: *Making Federalism Work - A Radical Proposal for Practical Reform*, <http://www.esiweb.org/>

Albania

Albania is the poorest country in the region, and among the least economically developed European country. Even though it did not experience ethnic turmoil in the 1990s it depends on foreign financial support. The Country Strategy Paper for Albania recommends certain institutional, political and economic reforms that the country will have to undertake in order to qualify for EU membership. In January 2004 the negotiations for a SAA between the EU and Albania were launched.

[Albania](#) applied for [European Union](#) membership on 28 April 2009. Officially recognized by the EU as a "potential candidate country", Albania started negotiations on a [Stabilization and Association Agreement](#) (SAA) in 2003. This was successfully agreed and signed on 12 June 2006, thus completing the first major step toward Albania's full membership in the EU.

Following the steps of the recently admitted [Eastern European countries in 2004](#), Albania has been extensively engaged with EU institutions, and joined [NATO](#) as a full member in 2009. It has also maintained its position as a stability factor and a strong ally of [Western Europe](#) in the troubled and divided region of the [Balkans](#).

Following its application for EU membership, the [Council of the European Union](#) asked the [European Commission](#) on 16 November 2009 to prepare an assessment on the readiness of Albania to start accession negotiations, a step in the accession process that usually takes about a year. On 16 December 2009, the European Commission submitted the Questionnaire on accession preparation to the Albanian government. Albania returned answers to them on 14 April 2010. Candidacy status was not recognized by the EU in December 2010 due to the long-lasting political row in the country. The parliament in August 2012 rejected a proposal to abolish immunity for parliament members, ministers and people in some other official positions. The EU required this to be abolished along with 11 other main issues, so candidacy was delayed. However, in September 2012 a constitutional amendment was unanimously passed which limited the immunity of parliamentarians. In October 2012 the European Commission evaluated the progress of Albania to comply with 12 key priorities, being conditional to achieve official candidate status and start accession negotiations⁵.

⁵ Brussels, 10.10.2012 SWD(2012) 334 final Commission Staff Working Document Albania 2012 Progress Report accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2012-2013 {COM(2012) 600 final}

Instead of Conclusion

Perspectives or Challenges of EU Accession Process for Western Balkans Countries

The short-term goal of the EU for the Western Balkans was the stabilization of the region and the prevention of new conflicts. The subsequent goal was to foster the development of economic, political and cultural ties within the region. Assuming that the EU will eventually integrate the Western Balkans, one of the hypotheses of this paper is that accession to the European Union will safeguard peace and stability, not only in the region but also in the European continent.

Stronger regional cooperation increases the prospects for the more rapid integration of the region into the EU. Some feared that regional cooperation would be a trap to keep the countries of the Western Balkans together without giving them the chance to prove their progress individually.

The governing political establishments of the Western Balkan states consider that the only fair approach towards eventual EU enlargement is a fully flexible, multi-speed accession process, known also as the “regatta principle”. It allows each of the Western Balkan countries to proceed at its own pace and to be assessed on its own merits. Countries will join when they are able to meet all the obligations inherent to membership and to accept compliance with the common European values and standards, as well as the *acquis communautaire*. For that reason, each country is motivated to accelerate necessary reforms. Highlighting the implications of Croatia's member state status for other countries of the Western Balkans, the European Council emphasized that the advance of the individual countries of the region towards European integration will proceed in parallel with the regional approach, which remains an essential element of EU policy.

Certain countries such as Germany or France pointed to insufficient maturity of the EU member candidates and the limited EU enlargement capacities. They established that a long-break will ensue now that Croatia turned the 28th EU member in July 2013. The

analysis states that when it comes to the regional countries, the enlargement enthusiasm has dropped out due to the crisis in the Eurozone.

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